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INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 000244

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STATE FOR SCA/FO, SCA/A, S/CRS
CG CJTF-82, POLAD, JICCENT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/07/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: LOWER HOUSE DEPUTY SPEAKER LIKELY TO RUN FOR
PRESIDENT

REF: KABUL 183

Classified By: Ambassador William Wood for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Lower House Deputy Speaker Mirwais Yaseni (Nangarhar, Pashtun) told the Ambassador February 1 that he will run as a candidate in this year's presidential election.

Yaseni criticized President Karzai's inability to rein in corruption. He will campaign on a reformist platform that supports democratic institutions and rejects the traditional "Old Power" arrangements of the mujahideen and various warlords. Yaseni is encouraged by his multi-ethnic support in Parliament to run for president. Yaseni supports the Independent Election Commission's setting of the election for August 20 and on the need for Karzai to remain in office until the conclusion of the election.

Re-Election As Deputy Speaker Buys Presidential Ambitions

¶2. (C) Yaseni told the Ambassador his 135-58 vote victory in the Lower House's First Deputy Speaker race last week over a Karzai ally (reftel) convinced him that he had sufficient backing to launch a presidential campaign. Yaseni said Karzai had failed to fight corruption, surrounded himself with bad advisors, and allowed neighboring countries to interfere in domestic politics, thereby disqualifying himself from continuing in office. Other possible candidates represent Afghanistan's past and have not offered a credible platform for the future, he said.

¶3. (C) Yaseni had once been a reliable Karzai supporter and used his informal multi-ethnic parliamentary faction to deliver votes for the president. Even when he began to privately criticize Karzai's administration two years ago, he was usually still willing to carry the Palace's water in Parliament. However, Yaseni told Deputy National Security Advisor Engineer Ibrahim Spinzada last week that he would not support Karzai's re-election. Spinzada replied that the Palace was confident Karzai was still the strongest candidate in the race.

A '2nd Generation' Afghan Politician

¶4. (C) Yaseni said he could not support any of the other major challengers to Karzai, as most, including the United Front, represented Afghanistan's past and pursued their own agendas. Nangarhar Governor Gul Aqa Sherzai, did not possess the skills or education to hold national office. Moreover, Yaseni has been frustrated by a recent series of closed-door Palace meetings Karzai has hosted with jihadi leaders to discuss various political issues. These meetings isolate younger democratic institutions such as Parliament and reinforce warlords' traditional power. Instead, Yaseni contended that a number of governors and MPs, who he characterized as a "second generation" of Afghan politicians,

are better equipped to lead the country.

15. (C) Yaseni described a campaign strategy more similar to Western models than is typical for an Afghan candidate. He plans to solicit \$1,000 contributions from up to 4,000 businessmen to fund his campaign and recruit an army of young volunteers to staff offices in the country's most populous cities -- a far cry from more traditional Afghan campaigns that rely on personal fortunes and winning over tribal elders. Yaseni believes the support he won from all ethnic groups in his parliamentary race will translate into voting strength throughout the country (we believe many MPs voted against his rival as much as they voted for him).

Support for Stable Election Campaign Season

16. (C) Despite his disappointment with Karzai, Yaseni will support the legitimacy of Karzai's term from May up to the inauguration of the election winner. He endorsed the IEC's authority to set election dates. He also agreed that any of the scenarios for transitional governance would disrupt the continuity of government and could lead to more problems. Yaseni had earlier told Poloff he would make sure anti-IEC rhetoric in Parliament did not get out of control.

17. (C) The Ambassador stressed the neutrality of the U.S. in the Afghan election and reiterated U.S. support for institutions over individuals. He told Yaseni Afghanistan needed candidates who were ready to break with old political models and pursue modern campaign strategies. The Ambassador assured Yaseni the international community would monitor

KABUL 00000244 002 OF 002

fraud allegations and push the Afghan government to hold a free, fair, and open election.

Even if Not a Top Contender, Campaign is Encouraging

18. (C) Yaseni faces long odds against the well-financed titans of Afghan politics and probably greatly overstates his popular backing. But his presence in the race is an encouraging sign for the country's political scene, which has long been dominated by warlords and undemocratically anointed factional leaders. Afghan politics should benefit from any candidacy built on pan-ethnic coalition building and issues-based platforms.

WOOD